

Strengthening of community life as basis for a renewed humanism for the XXI Century

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CONTEXT

The COVID-19 Pandemic has confronted our global society with a condition frequently seen as superseded: that of humanity's frailty. The enormous technological achievements have imparted us with a notion of progress that bestowed on humankind a position of near-lordship over the natural world, and nourished a generalized perception that solutions of a technical nature could alone hold the key for human progress and betterment¹. Such self-conscience has proved resilient in face of the direst forecasts concerning climate change, and even the boldest past warnings of a biological threat such as we are now experiencing. But our common life experience over the past months, which has unified the globe in unprecedented ways around a common challenge, not only contested such view, but reinforced the perception of some fundamental systemic fragilities. The numerous challenges that governments and societies are facing in tackling the coronavirus, and the threats that the Pandemic has further imposed to globalization and international cooperation, clearly show that the role of science as a response to crisis is limited in face of a socioeconomic disarrangement that increasingly cripples the potential gains of technical action.

Scientific and technological progress are per se incapable to answer to our common global challenges and produce resilient societies for the XXI century. Comparative moral and humanitarian progress, which must translate into a renewed socioeconomic organization, are necessary² to: (i) sustain democracies that can endure the regular assaults of populism and extremism, (ii) build a fairer capitalism, that can guarantee jobs and justly value all kinds of work, thus safeguarding a dignifying existence to all citizens, (iii) promote a truly humanist and scientific culture that is resilient in face of ideological impositions, and can both respect and promote people's freedom and traditions.

Despite a reduction of global poverty³, and generally improving international cooperation, Western Society was not able to match those developments by a sense of responsibility towards others. Growing numbers of people are being excluded from the social tapestry, generating resentment from populations and a generalized lack of trust in governmental leadership, which is seen as lacking of moral authority⁴. In fact,

the unprecedented levels of social inequality⁵ are fundamentally incompatible with healthy and stable democracies. The Pandemic has further exposed the weaknesses of a system where decision-taking and power to act are ever more distant from ordinary people and daily life. Entire states find themselves at times effectively subdued amidst a perverse dynamic where predatory corporate environments shifts power from people and their elected representatives to companies worth more than most sovereign states⁶.

The current crisis underlines the need of a profound change, and although science and technology are not in themselves the solution, they are necessary tools to enable it. In particular, information technology (IT) can provide the backbone for a large-scale reorientation of society that can help preserve the values of freedom, justice, communion, and respect for people's traditions and identity.

WHAT SHOULD CHANGE?

As globalization took human movements and exchanges to an unprecedented scale, as economic liberalism and internationalization changed the dynamics of the productive systems, thwarting the relation between people's income and real economy, and as populations grew to consume resources at unsustainable levels, a new fundamental organization of life has become necessary, if we are to build a resilient society, lest it be imposed on us by future calamities.

It is recognized that globalization contributes to global growth and development. At the same time, the detachment of supply chains and financial markets from the local economy are a central cause of alienation for growing numbers of populations. Large segments of the low-income population are not integrated into the global market economy and do not benefit from it⁷. The solution will likely depend on a greater valorization of the person as opposed to its economic utility⁸.

The building of a new humanism⁹ must be based on a socioeconomic structure where people find the opportunity for an integral development¹⁰. Such structure should emphasize the identity of the person, both at the smallest scale, strengthening families and cultural groups, as well as at national level, where cultural identity and tradition are preserved. These are not in opposition to movements of global integration and cooperation, but rather offer the proper humanist balance to it. Strong communities can effectively equilibrate some of the potentially disintegrating forces of globalization whereas making the entire process of socioeconomic integration more resilient. We argue that the construction of such communities needs a concrete re-organization of the space and an integral ecology¹⁰ that creates more resilient societies in face of future crisis.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

A new organization of space based in widespread, local communities, nucleated with the help of technology and virtual interconnectivity, and which partially reverses the

current trend towards mega-densification of urban centres, may be a key element in creating sustainable societies¹¹. In this context, the virtual sphere can effectively preserve the essential aspects of the dynamism of current cities, while responding to some of its greatest challenges, such as slum populations, marginalization, violence and inequality, etc.

COVID-19 has shown that global integration is possible through virtual channels, as well as productive work and learning, and here resides an opportunity for a large-scale re-thinking of the organization of socioeconomic structures. Advanced production systems based on industry 4.0 and IT should be exploited to the largest possible extent to provide a true and effective global network of local realities which could help counter some of the imbalances of globalization, promote better ecological integration of societies, while keeping people connected within a desirable common background of cultural exchange and global integration.

The strengthening of small communities could be achieved through a sustained decentralization of populations throughout the territories. Local realities provide the opportunity for a re-emergence of the small-scale economy which has been strangled by global markets and also gives the opportunity to preserve region-specific activities, which are an important cultural element. The rise of teleworking for education and culture provided by the internet means that such local communities can be completely integrated to the larger production system, so that economic resources from specialized employment as well as advanced learning can be brought in more naturally. The cost of life is made cheaper for all, thus allowing for a higher standard of living and higher employability.

This model could have an impact in rebuilding the endangered humanism of our depersonalized society by guaranteeing important values of community life, stronger family bonds, and the preservation of traditions and cultural identity. These are social qualities that help forming individuals with better conscience of belonging, of place and self, which in turn builds character and creates citizenship¹², reinforcing freedom and democracy against populism and ideology¹³.

Such communities could not prescind from the support of realities such as churches and religious institutions, as well as other organizations. The geographical shift, nevertheless, must reshape the structure of work, consumption and social organization and will likely depend on joint action by states and companies which act as catalysts. The proposed scheme emphasizes the importance and role of the virtual sphere in future society, a trend that cannot be reversed, but should be better oriented for the common good.

NOTES

¹ Cf. Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, (London, Harvill Secker, 2016). See also Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, (London, Penguin Books, 2014), §9 The Human Factor.

² Cf. Pope Paul VI, Opening address to the United Nations conference on the peaceful uses of outer space, August 6, 1968.

³ See The World Bank, World Development Report, 2017, p. 2

⁴ Cf. Martin Wolf, Capitalism and Democracy: The Strain is Showing, Financial Times, August 30, 2016, available online at <https://www.ft.com/content/e46e8c00-6b72-11e6-ae5b-a7cc5dd5a28c>

⁵ “For example, the bottom half of adults account for less than 1% of total global wealth in mid-2019, while the richest decile (top 10% of adults) possesses 82% of global wealth and the top percentile alone owns nearly half (45%) of all household assets.” Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report 2019: <https://www.credit-suisse.com/media/assets/corporate/docs/about-us/research/publications/global-wealth-report-2019-en.pdf>

⁶ Cf. Ladislau Dowbor, The Age of unproductive capital: New architectures of power, (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), §11 The Request of New Courses.

⁷ The World Bank, The Next 4 Billion, 2007, p.4.
See <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/779321468175731439/pdf/391270Next04obillion.pdf>

⁸ Cf. Maria Bingemer, The Mystery and the World: Passion for God in times of unbelief, (Cambridge, The Lutterworth Press, 2017), §1 Premature or Late Modernity: A question of culture.

⁹ “The problem of international understanding is a problem of the relations of cultures. From those relations must emerge a new world community of understanding and mutual respect. That community must take the form of a new humanism in which universality is achieved by the recognition of common values in the diversity of cultures.”, quoted in Irina Bokova, A New Humanism for the XXI Century, address by the Director-General of UNESCO, Milan, 7 October 2010.

¹⁰ Cf. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter Laudato Sí, 2015. The Pope uses the term “integral ecology” to describe such development.

¹¹ See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/cities/>

¹² Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre. Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), After Virtue: A study in moral theory, (Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

¹³ Cf. Edith Stein, Psicologia e scienze dello spirito. Contributi per una Fondazione filosofica, (Roma, Città Nuova, 1999). See also Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, How Democracies Die, (London, Penguin Books Ltd, 2019)